

A type of the three thousand negroes in Coatesville. Drawn from life by Jay Hambidge

What We All Stand For

The Significance of the Behavior of a Community Toward Its Citizens Who Burned a Man Alive

By Albert Jay Nock

Illustrations by Jay Hambidge

ON SUNDAY evening, August 13, 1911, at the hour when churches dismiss their congregations, a human being named Zack Walker was taken by violence out of the hospital at Coatesville, Pennsylvania, where he lay chained to an iron bedstead, in the custody of the law, suffering from a shot-wound, apparently self-inflicted.

The bedstead was broken in half, and the man, still chained to the lower half, was dragged half a mile along the ground, thrown upon a pile of wood, drenched with oil, and burned alive.

Other human beings to the number of several hundred looked on in approval. When Walker with superhuman strength burst his bonds and tried to escape, they drove him back into the flames with pitchforks and fence-rails, and held him

there until his body was burned to ashes. Those who could get fragments of his charred bones took them off as souvenirs.

All this happened because the day before, the 12th, Walker had shot and killed a human being named Rice, a private policeman at the steel-mills. Rice was not shot in the discharge of his duty. He was off duty, and perhaps a quarter of a mile off his premises, his beat. He was on the outskirts of the horrible region called Murderers' Gulch, where the negro mill-hands live. Walker lived, if one calls it living, in a hovel there. Perhaps Walker killed Rice in self-defense. He claimed this, at any rate, in a confession which he made after being captured next day. Whether he told the truth or not will never be known. There were no witnesses.

However, he was burned alive. Why was it done? There was no fear of his cheating the law. Nowhere in the United States could a negro cheat the law for such an offense committed against a white man—unless, possibly, he were a very rich negro, and Zack Walker was miserably poor. The citizens of Coatesville had no fear for the "majesty of the law," whatever that is. It was perfectly safe. No one even thought of it.

Nor were they roused to frenzy by a crime committed against a leading citizen. Rice was far from being a popular idol. He was an obscure person, almost as obscure as Walker himself, not distinguished by anything that would make his life in any sense a public property. In mind and morals he seems to have been about the usual run of man one finds



"Coatesville is typically one of those industrial towns

discharging the doubtful function of private policeman for the owners of an industrial plant.

Nor again—and this is worth particular notice—did the crime arise from race-hatred. There is no feverish and sensitive traditional race-feeling in Coatesville which might have brought forth this lynching out of whole cloth, as it does occasionally in some parts of the South. Coatesville is a Northern town. What traditions it has are those of Quakerdom. There is the current accepted commonplace, of course, that the negro is an inferior race—but, dear me, that is everywhere! People have said to me, "Well, but might not this same thing have happened to a Hungarian or Slav laborer, under the same circumstances?" Certainly it might; but it was just a *little more* likely to happen to a negro. Just as when, for instance, a negro boy and a white boy start out under equivalent conditions to look for work in New York, Boston, Detroit, Minneapolis, or Seattle, the negro boy is a *little less* likely to land a job than the white boy. This *little more* and *little less* measure the limit of race-prejudice in Coatesville as elsewhere in the North.

FINALLY, the lynching of Walker was not hatched out of deliberate and cold-blooded wickedness. It had been premeditated, no doubt, but almost certainly not in the spirit that most of us would suspect. Telephone-messages went out of Coatesville the day before, bearing invitations to the lynching if the man were caught. Telegrams were sent to certain papers in New York and Philadelphia, asking how many words they would run in a lynching-story. But no archdevil with a cool and scheming brain sat up in his office plotting the thing out and apportioning the details around among his minor devilry. No one organized a set scheme of crime for purposes of his own. The crime was without purpose and without fruit. It served no one, appeased no one, consoled no one. It accomplished nothing that process of law was not altogether certain to accomplish better.

If the lynching had been due to any of these causes, this magazine would not publish the story. This magazine is interested in *civilization*,—the humanizing of men in society,—and we publish this story because through it we are able to present a clear picture of a kind of community life that by many, in spite of repeated warnings, is still thought to have the elements of civilization in it. It neither has them nor can have them. Where life is lived and industry carried forward on the conditions that prevail in Coatesville,—and that means nearly all our industrial towns and cities,—civilization is wholly impossible. Wealth there may be, and luxury, and all the apparatus of civilization, but civilization itself cannot be had on those terms.

And as our first exhibit we call attention to the fact that the idea of lynching Walker sprang, one may say, out of mere idleness. The people of Coatesville burned Walker in a spirit hardly different from that you see in a crew of gutter-bred youngsters who torture a dog to death—from no deep ground of hatred of the dog or his kind, but more than anything because their ordinary life is lived on a plane where such acts are not seen to be wholly alien, unnatural, and frightful. It was a crime of callousness, of sheer indifference to human distress and pain.

Let us follow the outlines of the story. The whole press of the United States broke forth in a chorus of indignant execration. Governor Tener issued a proclamation. Drinking-places in Coatesville were immediately closed by the authorities, fearing (what irony!) an outbreak of the negroes! The State constabulary was called out, and the quiet streets of Coatesville they patrolled on horseback, with dragoon revolvers at their hand. It was a ludicrous sight; for the negroes made no trouble, gave no intimation of making any, had not the faintest idea of making any. The original mob of whites, too, had melted away in a few moments. As soon as their horrible and savage sport was over, they dispersed at once and went about their business.

Half a dozen arrests were made within a week; all of them very obscure, poor

people, some of them boys. Not one of the instigators was apprehended, nor one of the ringleaders.

UNDER a very vigorous and sweeping charge from Judge Butler the grand jury found some true bills. Mr. Cunningham, the assistant attorney-general, came down from Harrisburg to assist the district-attorney, Mr. Gawthrop. Application was made for a change of venue, to have the trials take place in some other part of the State, before a non-local jury. The Supreme Court of Pennsylvania refused the request. No reason was assigned.

The cases were promptly brought to trial at West Chester, the county seat of Chester County, where Coatesville is. The trial jury brought in a verdict of *not guilty* in each and every case, and the prosecution collapsed. The prisoners received an ovation from such of the Coatesville populace as went to West Chester to attend the trials, and again on their return to Coatesville from the stay-at-homes who came to the station to meet them.

Pinkerton's detectives were put on the case to ferret out the ringleaders, but their work came to nothing. The State police looked into the matter also, but their principal operative, Mr. Cady, died under mysterious circumstances while still at work, and his evidence also mysteriously disappeared. It is supposed to have been sent to Harrisburg, but of this nothing is known.

Thus it was shown that in the year 1911, in Pennsylvania, in the heart of a Quaker settlement, there could be committed as atrocious, idle, and purposeless a crime as ever was committed in the world—a human being burned to death merely to make a hoodlum holiday—and its perpetrators escape scot-free.

When the prosecution failed and the State and local authorities withdrew their agents, the American Association for the Advancement of Colored People quietly entered the field. If the issue of civilization is finally enforced upon Coatesville and the State of Pennsylvania, the credit will belong to this noble



that William Cobbett gruffly called Hell-holes"

society. I am glad of the opportunity to praise them. With inadequate means, lukewarm support, and with most avenues of publicity closed to them, these people have given themselves to the most unpopular cause in the world, yet one which is obviously fundamental to civilization—equality of opportunity for a great, unprivileged, overborne, unhappy section of our people. As long as *any* are victims of inequality, as long as *any* are exploited or dispossessed, there can be no civilization—and this means negro human beings as well as white.

The Association for the Advancement of Colored People employed William J. Burns to put his operatives into Coatesville. This took place in the summer of 1912. In September the chairman of the society, Mr. Oswald Garrison Villard, its attorney, Mr. Wherry, and the writer of this article, accompanied Mr. Burns to Harrisburg and laid the results of the investigation before Governor Tener.

THE Governor's attitude was all that could be desired. He was well-informed about the case, fair, candid, and interested. He said plainly that he regarded the Coatesville affair as "one of the failures of the administration." He discussed the most intimate aspects of the case, the reach of Chester County politics, the stress of influential friendships, and all the suspected reasons for the paralysis of statutory justice, in the frankest way. He listened to the advice of Mr. Burns, promised that the case should be reopened at once, and carried through to a summary end, "let the chips fall where they would." He expressed complete agreement with Mr. Burns as to the proper methods to pursue.

Now after these external facts of history, let me give a few inside facts of a plainer and simpler kind—if any could be simpler.

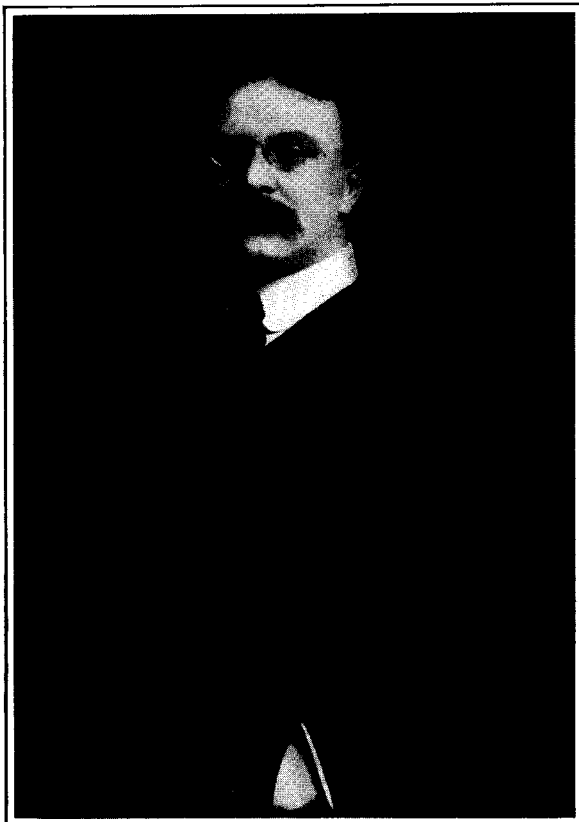
There has never been a time since the lynching of Zack Walker, nor is there now, when a good detective would have any trouble worth talking about in laying hands on the instigators and ring-leaders of that crime, or in getting sound evidence against them. The local police force in Coatesville could have had them within fifteen minutes—could have had them, in fact, before the crime was committed. They can get them now. Let alone a detective, a good lively news-

paper man could go to Coatesville and get them inside of ten days. Everyone knows this: it is a matter of open and notorious fact. Governor Tener knows it; the State and county authorities know it.

There is no doubt about it. *But what good would it do?*

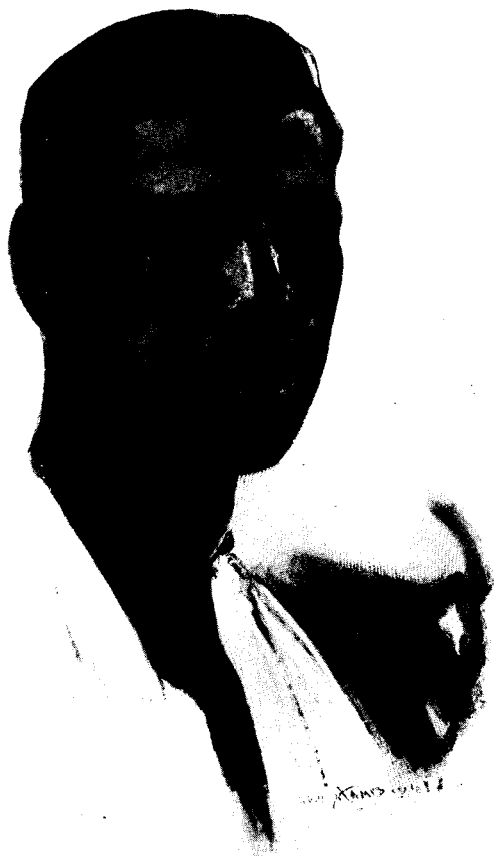
People are largely addicted to a number of curious delusions about statutory law, one of which is that it works by some kind of natural inherent force residing in itself. Really, it does nothing of the kind. Samuel M. Jones of Golden Rule fame, one of the wisest as well as best of men, said that law means anything the people will back up. It means precisely that. Also, anything the people will not back up is not law, however clearly it is laid down on the statute-books, and cannot be enforced. And here is the reason of the great "failure of justice," as the popular term goes, following the Coatesville lynching. Freely concede that the whole prosecuting force, from the Governor down, was in deadly earnest and did the very best they could—why not? The matter of their sincerity, important when taken by itself, becomes in the larger view almost immaterial. Whatever they did or however they did it, the indisputable fact is that in proposing to enforce the elemental statutory law against murder—murder unprovoked, inexcusable, and peculiarly and indescribably fiendish—they were proposing something that *the people would not and will not back up.*

Why, look at it! The first case tried was on a *confession*,—a confession of complicity, under the charge of Judge Butler to the grand jury, whereby he instructed them that every person abetting the act with his presence and assent was legally guilty of murder,—and the verdict of the trial jury was *not guilty.* Material



OSWALD G. VILLARD

Publisher of the New York Evening Post; grandson of William Lloyd Garrison; unsparingly devoted to the interests of the negro. One of the most active officials in The Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which pushed the investigation of the Coatesville episode



A type

witnesses left Coatesville with more money than they had ever seen in a lump sum in the whole course of their lives. No attempt was made to detain them before they left or reach them after they had gone. It is perfectly well known where they went and where they are now.

The case of the police officer Howe failed even to come to trial. He was in charge of the prisoner Walker at the hospital, on guard with a loaded revolver. He made no resistance, fired not a shot—this, too, in face of the fact that only one man at a time could enter the room. Howe was not removed from the force—he was suspended for a few days, but no more. The chief of police, Umstead, while under indictment for manslaughter, stood for reappointment, and won. There is no need to say more—one can make a clear enough inference about the direction of public opinion from the items given.

But we are not commenting on this technical "failure of justice," for we are not interested in obtaining convictions or in seeing that the majesty of the law is vindicated—whatever that grandiose term amounts to. So far from believing that if you can only get enough people in jail or on the gallows, everybody will be moral and happy, we seem to see that murder, brutality, violence, and hatred mean about the same thing inside the law as outside, and have about the same effects when administered by law as when administered against the law. Our interest lies in *reasons*, in *causes*. Surely, if any statutory law has a moral sanction, it is the elemental law against murder. Why do the people of Coatesville nullify it? What are the reasons for public

opinion remaining at such an appallingly low level?

They are not far to seek. One may see them from the car-windows before one leaves the train at the Coatesville station. Coatesville is typically one of those industrial towns that William Cobbett called *Hell-holes*. It is a perfect miniature model of an American industrial city, so small that you can take it in at a glance, and so accurately drawn to scale that not an essential part is missing or a non-essential feature added. That is why it is such a superb model, the best I have ever seen, for social study. The smaller industrial towns of Massachusetts and Rhode Island I have observed to be much the same. There is great advantage in getting small accurate models of great subjects before one's eyes. Let the most ardent stand-pat protectionist, for instance, sit one forenoon through by the gates of some French town and watch a community trying to tax itself rich by the operation of the *octroi*, or import tax, as the old women bring in their chickens and butter and their handful of eggs. Let Mr. Taft himself do this, and I warrant he will go away a free-trader, because he can see the incidence of that tax upon the home consumer as no one can see it when levied at the ports of a

great nation. So to see at a glance the whole cross-section of our industrial system, and to see how its works and ways bear upon civilization, one may find one's best model in Coatesville.

Civilization can only be had upon its own terms; and first of these is a diffused, material well-being. Next (if, indeed, it is not rather a part or adjunct of the first) is the thing one observes with such delight in France and Italy—a homogeneous population. Now the distinguishing feature of our *Hell-holes*, our American industrial centers, is the entire absence of these. At Coatesville material well-being is strictly concentrated, and the three several strata of society stand as distinct as layers in a jelly cake. Coatesville has about twelve thousand population. The immense stratum of the exploited is

composed of three thousand negroes and thirty-five hundred "foreigners,"—in Coatesville the term is applied to human beings who come there from Hungary and the Slavic countries to work for \$1.38 per day, and live most wretchedly. All these work in the two great iron and steel-plate mills—the Worth plant and the Lukens plant. Their wages, their conditions of work and living, preclude either happiness or decency. It is an interesting fact that while the Lukens mill has been here one hundred and twelve years, as late as 1900 there were only five "foreigners" in Coatesville. There are thirty-five hundred now. The "protected American workman" might note this coincidence if he likes, dating as it does from the palmy McKinley-Hanna days down through the uplifting administration of Mr. Roosevelt to the Payne-Aldrich-Taft comedy.

Above the stratum of the exploited is another, a smug, close-mouthed, unintelligent middle stratum that gets its living out of the town, by trading and in other ways. This class is characterized by an extreme apprehensiveness about anything that will "hurt business" or "hurt the town." Immediately after the lynching this class began to agonize over the prospect of publicity, just as the same class in Pittsburgh became hysterical over "the good name of Pittsburgh" when the press began to air the scandal of councilmanic graft a couple of years ago. Why, it is almost laughable to see the distrust that members of this class show toward each other when the lynching is mentioned! It is a tabooed subject, a thing to be hushed up at all costs. Paraphrasing Sydney Smith's remark, this



He works for \$1.38 per day and lives most wretchedly

class (I hope no one will imagine me ignorant that there are honorable exceptions) would cheerfully bear any burden of infamy, however great, rather than any odium of publicity, however slight.

Above this is the stratum of the exploiting class. It is very small. I gladly put to its credit the one long mark that it is a resident class. The mill-owners do not, as in Lawrence, Massachusetts, for example, live off the scene of their exploitation. The steel-mills are family concerns, not in the trust, and the owners have made immense fortunes. The owners are Quakers. I am told that they will not manufacture armor for battle-ships nor sell their products for any purpose connected with war. But they pay their laborers less, on the average, than two dollars a day, and permit or promote for them conditions of living worse than one can find in the countries from which the "foreigners" have emigrated.

"An upper class materialized, a middle class vulgarized, a lower class brutalized."

There you have precisely the cross-section of Coatesville, as of Lawrence, Pittsburgh, Pawtucket, Providence, Fall River, all our myriad *Hell-holes*—nay, you have the cross-section of whole commonwealths, for from the standpoint of civilization what is Pennsylvania but a magnified Coatesville or Massachusetts but a projection of Fall River? There is no diffused material well-being in either State. There is nothing like a homogeneous people in either State. So if we stop measuring the civilization of a community by its balances of trade, or the number of its newspapers, population, miles of railway, banks, finance companies, manufactured products, and the like, and measure it by the simple tests we have applied to Coatesville, we find that Pennsylvania is not a civilized community, that Massachusetts is not a civilized community.

This conclusion is accurate and sufficient. It modifies our conception of such horrible happenings as the Coatesville *auto da fé*. The lynching of Zack Walker was a frightful tragedy; but let us never forget that it was only a *registration*. It was as much a *registration* of the industrial progress of the United States as the consular reports, or the balance-sheet of an industrial corporation. We do not want to interfere with Governor Tener in his attempt to "uphold the majesty of the law"—we are merely not interested. Plenty of people there will be without us to enthuse over a few convictions,—if anybody is ever convicted,—and to imagine that society has somehow greatly redeemed and purified itself by a few hangings, a few imprisonments. But we cannot give our interest to so suspiciously short and easy a method with so great a problem. Hanging the murderers



One of the thirty-five hundred "foreigners" whose "wages, conditions of work, and living preclude either happiness or decency"

of Zack Walker seems to us like smashing the thermometer that has registered an unpleasant temperature. Smash the thermometer by all means, if one gets any comfort out of it; but the weather will be just as hot. Hang the lynchers of Zack Walker by all means, if one has any appetite for mere vengeance; but we wish to point out that nothing has been done for civilization as long as we leave untouched an industrial system that keeps on producing an *upper class materialized, a middle class vulgarized, a lower class brutalized*.

The lynching was a frightful crime, but it is over, it is past remedy. The warning remains—a warning to examine carefully the ground of our industrial life, the life which has made our immense fortunes and our immense poverty and misery, made our millionaires, made our obstinate inequalities, made our *Hell-holes*; and instead of giving us civilization, a homogeneous people, progressing toward a harmonious and general perfection, issues only in an *upper class materialized, a middle class vulgarized, a lower class brutalized*.